20 Years in the Making: George Zimmerman's 'Minority Defense' and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots

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Submitted by Tamara Nopper on April 20, 2012 – 1:01 amNo Comment

20 Years in the Making: George Zimmerman's "Minority Defense" and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots

Tamara K. Nopper

April 19, 2012

The murder of 17 year old Trayvon Martin has garnered national headlines and engendered political protests and a federal investigation. While more details of the murder and the police's handling of the case may surface in future legal proceedings, this much is known: when walking back to the home of his father's girlfriend in a gated community in Sanford, Florida on February 26, 2012, Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a captain of an unregistered watch group that patrolled the neighborhood. Zimmerman claims he shot Martin out of self-defense after being attacked by the teenager. Before he was formally charged with second degree murder in mid-April, Zimmerman's supporters were defending him against another charge, this one political: the watchman's shooting of Martin, an African American, was an act of racism and not self-defense.

One of the first and most notable attempts at defending George Zimmerman in the court of public

opinion was when Robert Zimmerman, George's father, sent a short letter to the *Orlando Sentinel* in mid-March addressing his son being painted as a racist. He wrote: "The portrayal of George Zimmerman in the media, as well as the series of events that led to the tragic shooting are false and extremely misleading…George is a Spanish speaking minority with many black family members and friends. He would be the last to discriminate for any reason whatsoever." Put simply, as a fellow minority with Black friends, Zimmerman cannot be racist against African Americans.

Although the elder Zimmerman's statement never describes George as Latino or Hispanic, news reports began to identify him as such. Features on Zimmerman revealed that his father is white and his mother Peruvian and that some neighbors consider him Latino. Public debates about whether Zimmerman was really Hispanic or white ensued.

Zimmerman and the "Browning of America"

In some accounts, Zimmerman's interracial lineage as well as his being Latino exemplified the "browning of America." According to this framework, the increasing Latino population in the United States will change not only the racial and cultural demographics of the the country but also how we as a nation think about race, identity, and being American. Just as "internal" diversity among Latinos by color, nationality, migration histories, and class reportedly makes it difficult for some Latino immigrants and their descendants to determine "who they are," or "what box to check" on the U.S. census, non-Latino Americans will also have to question long standing assumptions about what race is and how it operates in the face of increasing diversity.

Such sentiment was expressed in discussions about Zimmerman. For example, in an article in *The Washington Post* titled "Who is George Zimmerman?" (and republished by *The Seattle Times* under the headline "Florida shooter George Zimmerman not easily pigeonholed"), the reporters write, "There may be no box to check for George Zimmerman, 28, no tidy way to categorize, define and sort the man whose pull of a trigger on a Sanford, Fla., street is forcing America to once again confront its fraught relationship with race and identity."

In other writing, some authors were less ambivalent about Zimmerman's race and declared him white. One striking example of this was an op-ed published in *The Orlando Sentinel* written by Leonard Pitts, in which he responded to one reader's frustration at his not identifying Zimmerman as Hispanic in a previous column—"'Mr. Zimmerman was Hispanic not White plez do your homework before writing your column!!!!'" Pitts begins his column with: "I'm here to explain why George Zimmerman is white." Pointing out that according to the U.S. census, Hispanic is an ethnicity and not a race, Pitts draws from academic scholarship on what has come to be known as "whiteness" studies, which seeks to destabilize whiteness as the normative racial position by tracing how whiteness developed as a social and legal category and how whites became dominant in the U.S. racial hierarchy. Specifically, Pitts cites David Roediger, the historian famous for drawing from W.E.B. Du Bois's psychological wage of whiteness concept outlined in his 1935 classic *Black Reconstruction in America* and repackaging it as the "wages of whiteness." Recounting Roediger's basic premise that European immigrants "became white" after coming to the United States and learning, as James Baldwin famously put it, that "the price of the ticket" for whiteness is to distance oneself from Blacks, Pitts also defines being white as having your suffering and perspective matter in the world. As he puts it, whiteness is "not simply color, but privilege…the privilege of being seen, of having your worth presumed, of receiving the benefit of the doubt and some human compassion, of being treated as if you matter." Pitts concludes that for these reasons, Zimmerman is white.

Similarly, Isabel Wilkerson, in a *New York Times* essay on Martin's murder and the city of Sanford's racial history, employs aspects of whiteness studies in her discussion. For example, discussing how "unprecedented numbers of Latino immigrants have arrived at a place still scarred by the history of a vigilante-enforced caste system and the stereotypes that linger from it," she concludes, "In this context,

newcomers—like previous waves of immigrants in the past—may feel pressed to identify with the dominant caste and distance themselves from blacks, in order to survive."

Wilkerson's commentary suffers from one of the major limitations of some of the most popular work grouped under whiteness studies (such as that by Roediger, Baldwin, Noel Ignatiev, and Timothy Breen), which is the assumption that certain European immigrants or poor white Americans (or in Breen's case, white indentured servants) had at one point a shared, or at least similar status with African Americans in the race and class hierarchy in relation to white elites. In doing so, Wilkerson discursively transforms the descendants of African slaves into immigrants. She writes: "One of the great tragedies of the last century was the pitting of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe against African-Americans who had migrated from the rural South to the industrial North. Both groups were seeking the same thing and were pretty much the same people—people of the land trying to make a way for their families in forbidding and alien places." Unlike the European immigrants, who "chose" whiteness, Latinos, according to Wilkerson, may be forging a different path: "Despite all that has gone before, there is reason for optimism…The arrival of a new kind of immigrant to a country that has endured so much discord offers a chance for re-examination and redemption." Thus, "one of the most encouraging signs," Wilkerson asserts, is that Latinos "are increasingly choosing to be identified as 'other' rather than black or white" on the U.S. census and thus may reject the pattern of European immigrants who "became white" by distancing themselves from Blacks.

What this debate about Zimmerman's racial identity and Black-Latino relations demonstrates is that with few exceptions, we have no intellectual vocabulary to adequately discuss the *racial position* of non-Black people of color (NBPOC) in relation to African Americans in the U.S. racial order. Instead, as in the case of Zimmerman, we have the following options: argue that Latinos are "acting white," that George Zimmerman is a "white" Latino (although I think he could easily be read as a "Brown" Latino), or discuss the internal diversity of Latinos in terms of color, language, and nativity and simply hope that their so-called "internal" conflicts (which are really structural) get worked out soon. Overall, there is a difficulty, which appears to be both conceptual and emotional (or at the very least ethical), to say that as a Latino and thus someone who exists in the world politically as "Brown," Zimmerman or other Latinos can be anti-Black and more importantly, have political and social power over Blacks (in the United States and in Latin America) independent of identifying with whiteness or being socially or legally classified as white.

So what does all of this have to do with the 1992 Los Angeles Riots and more specifically, what do I mean when I write that Zimmerman's "minority defense" was "20 years in the making"? In brief, some of the major patterns of progressive race scholarship emerging after, and to large degree in response to the riots, contribute to the logic of Zimmerman's minority defense.

Post-1992 Los Angeles Riots Race Scholarship

In the wake of the riots, scholars argued that its multiethnic composition, as well as the changing demographics of the United States (think of the projection of the "coming white minority"), necessitated that political conversations about, and research on race go beyond examining white America's treatment of African Americans, a sentiment expressed in the slogan "beyond Black and white." Some scholars claimed that the Black-white model of race relations was inadequate for analyzing what some (mis)labeled "America's first multiethnic riot." Whereas previous urban rebellions have been characterized by African Americans looting or destroying white owned-businesses in response to police brutality and economic and political conditions, the 1992 riots involved primarily Black and Latino rioters, with Korean immigrant-owned businesses the hardest hit. Some scholars, denying the material basis of conflict, went so far as to suggest that one of the reasons Korean immigrants were targeted was because they were the victims of Blacks' *misdirected* anger partially caused by their purported ignorance of Korean history, people, and culture. In other words, if there had been more attention given to the experiences of other racial minority groups in public discourse and scholarship

prior to the riots, Blacks would have been less likely to be susceptible to negative images of Korean immigrants circulated in the media and would have thus directed their anger at another and more appropriate target (interestingly, Latino rioters are generally *not* depicted as targeting Korean storeowners for the same reason).

And so it began: going beyond Black and white would not only help us better identify what caused the 1992 riots but also prevent, through educational measures, future multiracial explosions (and more specifically, "Black (misdirected) rage"). More research on the shared racial oppression and community building between people of color would presumably thwart the dividing and conquering of oppressed peoples. In this spirit, a growing body of work examining the experiences of NBPOC and inter-minority relations has been published in the last 20 years. Within this scholarship there are two patterns I want to emphasize that are relevant to Zimmerman's minority defense.

Pattern 1: Comparative Racialization

The first pattern is that scholars claimed Asian Americans and Latinos have unique racial experiences that cannot be adequately understood using the Black-white framework. This work of comparative racialization sought to identify differences among people of color while still retaining the notion that all non-whites have a shared racial status under white supremacy. Much of this research traces its roots to Michael Omi and Howard Winant's book *Racial Formations* (1986, 1994)—treated as the bible among many progressive race scholars—which posits the primacy of race as a determinant of inequality and proposes that each group has a particular racial formation. This approach provided the best of both worlds for NBPOC progressive scholars: it rejected arguments, growing in popularity among a wide spectrum of ideological voices, that class, not race was the primary factor shaping life chances while not indicting any particular NBPOC group as dominant in relationship to African Americans.

The employment of the racial formations approach resulted in an (unstated) return of sorts, to Robert Blauner's colonialism model published in his book *Racial Oppression in America*. Blauner's framework examines the particular structural degradation of each minority group in the United States, such as slavery, colonialism, genocide, exclusion, or contract labor, while positing a shared oppressed status as non-white. From this perspective we could conclude that Zimmerman, as a "Spanish speaking minority" and son of a Peruvian mother, also knows discrimination and thus, "was more like the boy he killed than people thought. George was a minority—the other—too." While these words were actually penned by writers of the aforementioned *Washington Post* article, they could easily come from the pages of an academic monograph by a comparative racialization scholar.

Yet the return to a Blaunerian approach, by way of racial formations, ignored one of the most important points of Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton's 1967 book *Black Power*—which preceded the publication of Blauner's *Racial Oppression* by five years—in which they applied the colonial model to African Americans in U.S. urban ghettoes. While scholars have rightfully addressed the limitations of the colonial analogy for dealing with the afterlife of slavery, it is telling that contemporary scholarship is most likely to resemble Blauner's approach than that of Ture and Hamilton's. Perhaps this is because, as Ture and Hamilton suggest, analogizing African Americans and immigrant groups, even with the hesitance Blauner expresses in his work, will *always* be flawed. As they put it, "When some people compare the black American to 'other immigrant' groups in this country, they overlook the fact that slavery was peculiar to the blacks. No other minority group in this country was treated as legal property." In these two sentences, Ture and Hamilton anticipated and provide a critique of the racial formations approach as well as whiteness studies' aforementioned claim that non-Black groups could have a shared starting location on the "bottom" with African Americans despite not having been enslaved. Unfortunately, today, Ture and Hamilton tend to be cited by an aging group of (primarily African American) scholars whereas Omi and Winant's racial formations and its variants have continued to be popular among a broad array of progressives (for a clue on why this may be so,

consider the epilogues of both books' second versions as they each address the 1992 riots in ways that demonstrate competing political orientations).

Pattern 2: Compulsory Coalition

The second major pattern that emerged post-1992 was more research on the "hidden history" of cross-racial coalition between African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos. This literature, as openly stated by many of its writers, seeks to undermine the conclusion that conflict between people of color is inherent and inevitable. Taking as its point of departure the different racial formations/shared non-white status approach of the comparative racialization model, these studies are meant to not only reveal, but also forge, political solidarity between people of color. Notably, though, African Americans tend to be the primary targets for these gestures of coalition.

For example, research focuses on how Latinos and Asian Americans participated in political movements and groups associated with African Americans (such as the Black Panther Party) or through their own race-specific projects, collaborated with Blacks. Or, scholarship attempts to demonstrate that African Americans are "cosmopolitan" enough to work with other groups or to conceptually link their struggles with non-whites in the United States and the third world. In other words, this work celebrates African Americans for not *just* politically organizing with or on behalf of Blacks. Although perhaps empirically true, there is a punitive tone in this scholarship consistent with the beyond Black and white ethos. While the scholarship on multiracial coalition is reportedly necessary for revealing the hidden history of *all* groups involved, it is African Americans who've been unmercifully *targeted* with the beyond Black and white mantra for purportedly being politically selfish when it comes to recognizing others' oppression and competing with NBPOC in what has flippantly been termed "the oppression olympics." In short, while explorations of solidarity may be revealing and extremely moving to read, we are to conclude from this literature that African Americans are not the only ones who are racially oppressed or who fought for civil rights. Perhaps this is why the call to go beyond Black and white is not only popular among many NBPOC but also among "angry white males" who claim they are experiencing "reverse racism."

Related, as unpopular as it might be to say, there is an eerie similarity to the sentiment found in the coalition scholarship with that of Robert Zimmerman's letter defending his son. For example, the elder Zimmerman recounts gestures of kindness and mutual goodwill between George, again a "Spanish speaking minority," with Blacks:

> *One black neighbor recently interviewed said she knew everything in the media was untrue and that she would trust George with her life. Another black neighbor said that George was the only one, black or white, who came and welcomed her to the community, offering any assistance he could provide. Recently, I met two black children George invited to a social event. I asked where they met George. They responded that he was their mentor. They said George visited them routinely, took them places, helped them, and taught them things and that they really loved George.*

Some might be quick to point out that Robert Zimmerman's comment suggests that his son may not have been read by others as Latino ("George was the only one, black or white"), thus confirming that he is actually white (but notably not Black). Regardless if George Zimmerman is a white Latino (as news sources are now describing him), operating in both his father's words and the people of color coalition research is the assumption that non-Blacks do not extend themselves to African Americans unless they feel a *genuine* sense of political identification and solidarity. This assumption reveals a particularly insidious aspect of anti-Black racism linking Zimmerman's minority defense with progressive coalition scholarship: whites and NBPOC are shielded from critiques of racial power *over* Blacks because they

deign to befriend or politically collaborate with the so-called "wretched of the earth" i.e., African Americans, and only do so because they must have good hearts and are good people.

Related, as expressed in some whiteness studies, one is presumably less structurally white if they do *not* distance themselves from Blacks. Conversely, one is closer to whites the more they reject Blacks. As such, Zimmerman, presumably, does not have structural power over Blacks as a Latino but he could as a *white* Latino who has chosen whiteness instead of his "Brownness" (what Wilkerson celebrates as the choosing of "other" as opposed to white on the U.S. census by a growing number of Latinos). The irony of such arguments is that it reveals an analytical reliance on the denounced Black-white model (which purportedly represses the distinctiveness of racial formations) when it provides NBPOC a convenient refuge from political critique of having structural power in comparison to, and over Blacks (as opposed to having anti-Black attitudes). Presumably, if NBPOC, like Zimmerman, are anti-Black, it is because they are racially confused or denying their minority status. Put simply, Latinos and Asian Americans presumably cannot be anti-Black or have structural power over African Americans as Latinos or Asian Americans. Instead, as NBPOC, we must be "white," or "acting white" or "becoming white." Conversely, we presumably can dismantle racial power (often depicted as "racial conflict" as opposed to a structural antagonism) by socializing or politically organizing with or on behalf of African Americans.

People of Color Blindness

Progressive race scholars whose post-1992 work I've referenced will likely chafe at having their scholarship connected to Robert Zimmerman's defensive letter on behalf of his son George. Whatever the case, Zimmerman's "minority defense" and the progressive intellectual trends emerging in response to the 1992 Los Angeles Riots are both characterized by what Jared Sexton terms "people of color blindness": "a form of colorblindness inherent to the concept of 'people of color' to the precise extent that it misunderstands the specificity of antiblackness and presumes or insists upon the monolithic character of victimization under white supremacy." As Sexton puts it, people of color blindness results in a suppression of this "fundamental social truth": "not simply that antiblackness is longstanding and ongoing but also that it is unlike other forms of racial oppression in qualitative ways—differences of kind, rather than degree, a structural singularity rather than an empirical anomaly."

This people of color blindness found in the scholarship since the 1992 riots is accompanied by another disavowal: that the aggressive promotion of racial coalition between African Americans and other minorities—be they Spanish speaking or people of color—often serves as a disciplinary act towards Black political critique and protest, whether expressed in response to the conditions of urban life or the murder of a black teenager. While research and theorizing about non-Black people of color does need to be conducted, it must be done in a manner that recognizes—and not as an aside or obligatory gesture—the enduring specificity of anti-Black racism not only as an attitude but as an organizing principle of the global racial order in which Blacks in every single country are structurally at the bottom and have no analogue. More to the point: we need to address theoretically that Asian Americans and Latinos don't need to be assimilated (according to most traditional measures), be phenotypically white, be accepted by white people, like white people, or be free from white violence and racism, to have structural power in comparison to, and over African Americans. Anything less than confronting these issues will only result in more unfortunate overlaps between progressive race scholarship and more obvious retreats from race as expressed by Robert Zimmerman's defense of his son.

Tags: 1992 Los Angeles Riots, George Zimmerman, Latinos, people of color, people of color blindness, racial coalition, Robert Zimmerman, Trayvon Martin, whiteness studies